

Introduction

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Eating practices embody some of the most dramatic philosophical conundrums, including the puzzling divisions and linkages between culture and nature as well as those between appearance and reality. Obsessed with the connections between image and substance—the meat of the matter—an idle philosopher finds food for thought in the relationship between plastic sushi and “the real thing.” The remarkably literal plastic representations somehow take the place of the food itself. They deliver sushi to the viewer, the potential diner on the street, who is outside, not eating, just looking.

However, the models are not merely a visual substitution. They indicate the significance of both presentation and representation for eating in general. The plastic sushi may not be edible, but it is a feature of the discourse of sushi, part of a specific aesthetics of eating. And since it is not just food for thought but eating itself that seems to be the pertinent measure of aesthetics and reality here, the diner might well derive something more satisfying from substitutions other than the fake variety represented by plastic *tekka maki*. They trigger the appetite through the imagination, but deliver no real pleasure to the palate.

Consider, for example, the gastronomic possibilities and likely epistemological confusion that the following “international” substitutions present to the diner in the form of cooking tips: not only can a whole wheat tortilla (not a Mexican staple) stand in as a mock chapati, but a chapati can also function as a whole wheat

tortilla, and the tortilla can devolve into a "wrap." This contextually oblivious reversibility does not hold, however, for the prepackaged egg roll wrapper used in lieu of chile relleno batter. The material properties require a concoction that coats rather than wraps, an irreducible culinary reality. Or perhaps for the diner or cook caught up in the play of substitution, such considerations don't really matter.

Can ingredients used in Mexican, Indian, and Chinese cuisines really stand in for each other? Can culturally diverse cuisines—for instance, French and Thai, cream and fish sauce—be gracefully fused? It seems so now, and not only according to the leveling logic offered by the adage, "it all goes to the same place." Eating is seldom merely about destination or purpose. Eating is largely about creation and self-creation, and about the production and reproduction of human life.

While humans have basic nutritional needs, they are born into widely divergent fields of material and cultural availability (which includes lack). So much that pertains to eating goes well beyond purely practical issues, particularly nowadays, when, in some parts of the world, agricultural and transportation technologies seem to make everything available, regardless of season or location, time or space. Here and now we truly move from the possibilities of an aesthetics of eating to a hyperaesthetics—that is, to an aesthetics unbound by natural constraints. A simple desire, a whim, an idea can surpass the practical limitations—season and region—traditionally imposed by nature. Destination often immaterial, everything moves now, everything crosses the old borders (usually in one direction), all food circulates.

One form of evidence for this is phenomena such as durable rather than tasty tomatoes, which seem to be available practically anywhere, anytime, thanks to applied agricultural science, semitrucks, trains, and planes. Of course in the United States, a significant proportion of produce comes from elsewhere, including from Mexico and farther south, where environmental regulations do not forbid the use of agricultural chemicals banned in the U.S. and where also people on the whole do not eat as well as they do in America.

As another form of evidence for this transition to a hyperaesthetics, note the familiarity of Japanese, Mexican, Chinese, Indian, Italian, and other widely divergent cuisines to Americans from a range of lost or conflated ethnic backgrounds. Indigenous

figures such as Betty Crocker, Aunt Jemimah, Tony the Tiger, and the Pillsbury Doughboy once dominated store shelves. Now, large supermarkets across America—in small towns as well as large cities—routinely stock pita bread, frozen bagels, “oriental” condiments, fresh pasta, kiwi, tofu, “French” roast coffee, specialty vegetables, and on and on. The foreign has become the familiar, the different has been domesticated by Albertsons, Safeway, Pathmark, Winn Dixie, Grand Union, Kroger’s, King’s Sooper, and the other chains that provide a source of food for the masses, and link so much of “this eating culture” together. Part of the same domestication of difference is Euroamerica’s expectation that chopsticks are the appropriate utensils in an Asian restaurant (even a Thai restaurant), although the Western eater tends to use them like a fork—that is, to carry the food all the way from the tabled plate to the palate, rather than engaging the chopsticks with the bowl held to the mouth.

This is one side of the new internationalism. Then there are the other sides of the globe, such as the new universal-specific eating and drinking decisions that “we” face in common (e.g., Classic Coke or Diet Coke or Caffeine-free Coke or Caffeine-free Diet Coke or Cherry Coke, etc.)—that is, the consumer decisions that constitute a collective appetite.

Not reducible to an imagined melting pot, mixed ethnicity goes back to the beginnings of eating in colonized America. Early European settlers survived by adopting native farming, hunting, and gathering techniques, not to mention the food itself. The Pilgrims of Plymouth Colony—the most iconized beneficiaries of the fruits of native America—celebrated a plentiful harvest and their very survival in the autumn of 1621, which was formalized by Governor William Bradford’s proclamation declaring a three-day festival. This was the original Thanksgiving in America. Pilgrim hunters were sent out for meat, and bagged a fine string of turkeys (which Benjamin Franklin would later propose as the national bird). Massasoit and some of his Wampanoag were invited to the feast, and they contributed five deer. Complete with “friendly Indians,” this mythologized image is still absorbed by American schoolchildren when they are very young, with the meal at its center.

Thanksgiving is a wholesome eating ritual, unique because it is the only meal shared and celebrated by America as a nation, ostensibly able to efface ethnic and religious differences, if only for a day. But to avoid sacrificing the specificity of America’s past

to the apparent universality of the holiday, we might remind ourselves that just two years before that original Thanksgiving, the first black slaves had arrived in Virginia. One wonders what those slaves were fed on the ship, and one wonders what the ritual meal meant for the still-enslaved descendants of these first slaves, when—168 years after the “original” Thanksgiving—President George Washington proclaimed November 26, 1789, a national day of giving thanks to God—of, that is, Thanksgiving. Did slaves share this official Thanksgiving in a capacity other than their servitude? Or did it remain something foreign, a ritual owned by the culture of the masters? Later, in 1863, President Abraham Lincoln institutionalized the event by declaring the last Thursday of November a national holiday. The Civil War was of course tearing the country apart that particular autumn. Whether or not the turkey dinner actually helped to reinforce national identity, the effort was made in its name, and it has been made annually ever since then. Finally, and in order to encourage holiday shopping by lengthening the gap between Thanksgiving and Christmas, President Franklin Roosevelt changed the official date from the last Thursday of November to the fourth Thursday, which is where it has remained.

It seems appropriate that this latest adjustment to the national meal was a blatantly commercial one, since the machinery of food production and distribution in America—think of those millions of November and December totem turkeys—is in one of its fundamental profiles the machinery of big business. Consider the phrases, “Nature’s Best,” and “Healthy Choice,” which are now registered brand names. As such they have ceased to reach out as descriptive signifiers, and are no longer secured in life as simple use-values.

Nature itself has acquired a curious status in connection with eating practices lately too, having become something not just to use or exploit but to actively manipulate and transform. Technologized science intervenes in nature and reconfigures what nature provides through genetic engineering applied to plants and animals: hybrid grains developed to specification, designer meats and dairy products generated or enhanced by hormone stimulation, cloning, etc. Advanced irrigation techniques tap ancient aquifers deep beneath the planet’s surface. Enthusiasts claim that hydroponically grown vegetables are the food of the future (a scenario different from the one projected in the film *Soylent Green*).

Further, the food industry now harnesses and thus appropriates the idiosyncrasies of natural processes. In salmon "ranching," for example, the anadromous salmon return from the sea to their freshwater birth site, just as they have always done, but the human-made hatchery they were born in has now been converted to a butcher block, which the salmon swim right up onto. Out at sea, new methods of old-fashioned exploitation invade the water, such as the "squid" boats which have combed the planet's oceans, *mining* fish with nylon-monofilament gill nets up to forty miles long; little escapes the haul. In the supermarket, cans labeled "dolphin-free" tuna do not provide the reassurance that we might desire for guilt-free consumption.

Meanwhile, back on the farm, time-tested and apparently efficient but also clumsy, modern methods are deployed to combat nature. These include chemical pesticides, herbicides, and—to compensate for nature's inadequacies—fertilizers. Clearly, the traditional practice and significance of *the harvest*, the one associated with the original Thanksgiving, has been radically transformed, a mutation brought about by technology and by the fundamental value ascribed to efficiency and quantitatively maximized production, which can be linked not only to the profit motive, but also to the continual growth of the planet's perpetually and increasingly hungry population.

All of these elaborate apparatuses exist in a conflicted universe. Along with the alternate gauge provided by growing levels of pollution, depletion, and desertification, the perfection of the food machine may also be measured by a universe of hunger and malnutrition. In the long run this universe will be determined by the natural limitations of the planet's capacity to provide for its inhabitants, whose numbers grow exponentially. For the time being, this universe is a problem largely caused by the distribution of wealth. For some people, the range of eating possibilities has never been better. But for hundreds of millions of others, it remains as empty and bleak as it ever was.

While convenience stores are packed with microwave burritos and twelve-packs of beer, and while McDonald's is establishing new forms of globalism by reaching its next billion-served in Moscow, hunger remains a widespread problem throughout the world, not only in "developing" countries, but on the streets of postindustrial nations too. Technology may have helped create one world, but it is still a divided world, a world bifurcated by the

difference between empty bellies and full. According to some, water supply problems projected for the future may have a certain equalizing effect on all such disparities. For the time being, we can only speculate about these matters.

All of these global references may suggest an end to the regional dimensions of eating, which would be too facile. One need only note recent American food trends, with their fetishistic desire for everything from blackened red snapper to tandoori chicken, from the new Northern California style to Pacific Rim cuisine, from Perugina chocolates to Perrier, from Corona to Coors, and a continued craving for sushi, which persists despite warnings about parasites and the trade deficit. Some sophisticated restaurants go so far as to identify oysters as being not just from, for instance, Washington state, but from individually named bays and estuaries in Puget Sound, catering to the endless desire for particularity.

Led not by Pepsi's "freshness dating" but by Chez Panisse in Berkeley, the nouvelle cuisine from California has over the years transformed fresh into another fetish, another form of particularity. This desire for the fresh and natural that drives many postmodern eaters is part of an obsession with inspiring food, food that will take the diner somewhere special. A serving of *gado-gado* might send us, if not to Indonesia, at least somewhere fleetingly different, transported by the peanut sauce as it crosses the tongue. Eating food from other regions of the world, however, is no substitute for travel, and the distinction between place and taste remains critical. The difference marks not only distances measured by air travel, but also distances between neighborhoods.

For instance, Manhattan's East Sixth Street is widely known for its Indian restaurants among diners in search of "the exotic." Yet, by and large, these sophisticated diners do not venture out to the Queens neighborhoods where so many Indians live and eat. Wherever East Sixth vindaloo takes the adventurous gourmand, it is not necessarily somewhere Indian. In this case, the place remains familiar Manhattan. That is to say, the obsession with the special and the different remains attached to and perhaps even part of an apparently competing desire for the comfort of the known. McDonald's success in flirting with the unusual—fajitas—is only possible within its supremely generic universe.

If eating serves as a safe form of travel, then it seems increasingly important to travel light. That is, part of the new obsession with food is linked to a passionate concern about health, or about being slim, two related but not identical values connected to eating

(some say that Californians care about their bodies, while New Yorkers care instead about the way they look). Organically grown food is highly valued, although its exorbitant price represents the elitist reality of its production and its market niche; this is a cultural contradiction in North America, where the vast growth of the organic food industry grew out of the ideologically egalitarian counterculture of the sixties. But health concerns have come to permeate all food types, not just the elite variety. Cholesterol-free cooking oils are in, Crisco is out. Oat bran is still good, salt is not. Liver continues to provide a lot of iron, bacon contains fats and sodium nitrates. Eat a lot of roughage, peel your fruits, and avoid too much barbecue. Salad is especially slenderizing if you leave out the dressing, red meat is bad for you, and fish is good from a diet standpoint, although some fish may also contain significant traces of carcinogenic chemicals.

The endless goal is to slim down, be healthy, look good. This goal—this desire—fuels many new products (lean cuisine, lite beer, lite potato chips, lite ice cream, “fat-free” muffins, and the whole universe of Nutrasweet products, etc.). While exercise may remain the key to losing weight and staying fit, the new tactic for many seems to be solely dietary—it would be so nice if we could just eat ourselves thin (although the opposite holds true for many living with AIDS). Of course, men can get away with extra pounds a little easier than women, which reminds us that the disequilibriums of sexist culture permeate eating practices as much as any others.

Sexism continues to inform the preparation as well as consumption of food. Things change, so men cook at home more than they used to (often “gourmet”), but women still tend to be associated with the domestic cooking scene. Although women have begun to claim some territory as chefs in the most elegant dining establishments and even as cooks in greasy spoons, heterosexual white men remain the dominant force in professional kitchens; the often caricatured truckstop cafe survives as the basic model of sexist and racist hierarchy. Traditional roles and power relations continue to limit and constrain workers throughout the eating industry. For some diners, however, the possibilities appear to grow without end.

New prospects for diners derive from a range of sources. One source is a by-product of immigration patterns; the number of Vietnamese restaurants that have opened throughout the U.S. since the war is a good example. Emphasizing a different side of eating

out, though, this also has to do with shifts in widely dispersed cultural habits and values. Americans are filing out of the family dining room and lining up to be served. Sometimes this is an elegant, formal, and expensive affair. More often, though, it has to do with efficiency, apparent thrift, and even laziness, or at least a change of routine ("You deserve a break today . . ."). The change of routine pertains not only to where people eat, but also to what they eat and the way they eat it. For many, this does not always coincide with health concerns. Nor does it coincide with aesthetic concerns, not in a traditional sense. Here, again, the values put into play are those of a hyperaesthetics, which is largely a value associated with speed, with motion, with a fast modern lifestyle.

The dominant value here is often that of convenience, which has brought us frozen food, microwave meals, instant noodles, instant coffee, Instant Breakfast, Wendy's, Pizza Hut, and Taco Bell. Fast food in particular has become a way of life, even far from the fast-paced lifestyle associated with big cities. Perhaps the dissemination of fast food is one of the agents that has undermined the once clearer difference between the urban and the rural. The pick-and-run salad bar has become a central fixture in all sorts of eating establishments, from chicken and hamburger franchises to supermarkets to Korean delis. The salad bar in particular is a real advance in the history of fast food in that it enables the fit-but-fast segment of the population healthier possibilities than existed in earlier days, which were dominated by traditional deep-fried and other greasy delights.

Another alternative to heavy food is the lightest food of all, food online—check out www.epicurious.com—and televised eating possibilities, which the Food TV Network has pushed to the next level ("kick it up a notch," says Emeril). Electronic food is the fastest food of all.

The immediate availability of fast food has an apparently democratic character; we all have equal access to the same food lines. Of course mass food does not have to mean fast food. One of the more obvious examples of this is the ubiquitous, nationally advertised Red Lobster, where, we are told, you don't have to stand in line if you call in advance (make a reservation?). There are also other varieties of food lines, including the line in the all-you-can-eat, smorgasbord restaurant, the line in the cafeteria chains so popular in certain parts of the country, and, quite different, the line at the soup kitchens that have proliferated throughout this country

in recent years. But there are also the lines associated with the kinds of places where people are seated by a maitre 'd. These are the lines of exclusivity that divide mass eaters from the privileged diner, who can afford not only to eat ("to fill the hole"), but to eat very well, with wine to match. This is the line that keeps most eaters out of certain restaurants, the bottom line.

But the differences between kinds of eating experiences are clearly not determined by socioeconomic factors alone, and demand a broader cultural analysis. For example, eating practices were transformed by the dating-dancing-dining phenomenon of the '70s, when restaurants shifted from being primarily places to eat to, explicitly, places to meet. Eating and sex combined in novel ways, fusing desires into a new atmosphere, as well as a new market, a new kind of "meat market." Restaurants continue to evolve into more subtle and often wild formations, even into artworks. In downtown New York, for example, a once flashy steak house called "Teddy's," which featured dated photos of celebrities and other chic diners, reopened in the '80s as "El International," an ultratrendy, outrageously decorated hangout that served Spanish food to a sexy, fast-paced clientele. Since then, it has metamorphosed into an equally trendy Mexican restaurant, "El Teddy's," now a point of intersection for a variety of diners, all of whom are willing to pay the price for this exotic, if contrived atmosphere.

What is noteworthy about Teddy's/El International/El Teddy's, is that each of its new incarnations retains strong and eclectic traces of its previous identities, including the original photos of famous diners. The current restaurant's aesthetic proudly incorporates abundant archaeological evidence of its past, which determines its particular atmosphere. A postmodern restaurant such as this may strike some as too clever for its own good, particularly since it does not preserve so much as appropriate the past for its own purposes. Interestingly enough, however, it does not efface its past by succumbing to a modernist obsession with uncorrupted originality, an originality equally threatened by the other end of postmodernism, the infinite repetition represented by franchises such as Howard Johnson's.

Eating has never been simple, and contemporary eating practices seem more complicated than ever, demanding a multidimensional analysis that strives not for a reductive overview but for a complex understanding. The purpose of this collection of essays is to offer a number of diverse outlooks on some of the prominent practices and issues associated with the domain of eating in contemporary culture.

We think that the range of topics, perspectives, and possibilities presented here makes for an unusual and interesting menu. It is our hope that *Eating Culture* stimulates your appetite.